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I. STATEMENT OF POLICY

It is the policy of the Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) to assume a pro-active role in publicizing programs and activities in order to achieve our primary function of providing the best possible services to all service recipients.

An essential element of good community relations is effective and accurate communications with the local news media--both print and broadcast, the Legislature, and DCFS employees. Frequent, routine announcements of available services help to establish a positive image and develop a good working relationship with media personnel.

Therefore, the DCFS Communications Director and his/her staff shall establish and maintain open communications with media personnel such as newspaper editors, news broadcasters, reporters, and public affairs program directors as necessary to:

- Publicize available services.
- Announce new services.
- Solicit and recruit service recipients.
- Solicit foster and adoptive parents.
- Announce changes in regular office hours, schedules, etc.
- Announce public hearings on program changes.
- Respond to media inquiries.
- Solicit business and employers.


All departmental communication with media outlets and state and federal elected officials shall be managed by the ***Office of Communications.****

This policy shall be carried out under the direction of the DCFS Secretary through the Communications Director and is applicable to all DCFS employees.

Emergencies and Reportable Incidents

Decisions regarding the handling of a DCFS public relations crisis will be made by the DCFS Secretary and the Communications Director, in collaboration with the appointees responsible for programs in which such crises may occur. The goal of the response will always be to handle the crisis head-on by responding quickly to reporters' requests. The response will be factual while maintaining required client confidentiality. All media interaction during a crisis will be coordinated by the Communications Director. Examples of situations that are considered a public relations crisis include, but not limited to:

- Computer problems resulting in delay of benefits.
- The assault of a staff person.
- The death of a child which may have been caused by the biological parent or family member.

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- The death of a foster child.
- Hospitalization of a child in foster care due to alleged abuse or neglect.
- Facility problems such as a fire that would cause office closures or interruption of services, whether the facility is state-owned, leased, or run by a provider.
- Alleged abuse or neglect at a DCFS funded or licensed residential facility when becoming public and known to the media.
- Alleged abuse or mismanagement of any DCFS program when becoming public and known to the media.
- Threat of an attack at a facility.

In the event of a DCFS public relations crisis, the following actions are to be taken:

- The staff member in charge is to notify their Regional Manager/Administrator. The Regional Manager/Administrator, or their designee, will then notify the DCFS Communications Director at ***(225) 335-0551 (cell phone).*** The Communications Director will notify the DCFS Secretary of all crisis alerts that are received.
- The Regional Manager/Administrator, or their designee, will also notify the appropriate agency head and appropriate Division Directors.
- The Regional Manager/Administrator, or their designee, shall fill out the [Media Crisis Information Sheet](#) and e-mail it immediately to:


***Communications Director** Catherine Heitman
 Fax: (225) 342-8636
 E-mail: Catherine.Heitman.dcfs@la.gov

Deputy Secretary Terri Ricks
 Fax: (225) 342-9139
 E-mail: Terri.Ricks.dcfs@la.gov

Assistant Secretary for Family Support Alfreda Bester
 Fax: (225) 219-9399
 E-mail: Alfreda.Bester.dcfs@la.gov

Assistant Secretary for Child Welfare Rhenda Hodnett
 Fax: (225) 342-8636
 E-mail: Rhenda.Hodnett.dcfs@la.gov**

- The Communications Director will relay this information, when appropriate, to the DCFS Secretary immediately.
- Additional information relating to the crisis must be communicated by phone or e-mail to the Communications Director and to the respective agency head by the Regional Manager/Administrator, or their designee. This additional information will also be communicated to the DCFS Secretary by the Communications Director. If additional

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- information is needed by either the DCFS Secretary or by the Communications Director, a request will be made to the Regional Manager/Administrator or agency head.
- If the crisis directly involves staff, such as a personal threat or assault by a client, staff within the affected program will be informed of the crisis by the Regional Manager/Administrator. This will take place as soon as possible after the crisis occurs to eliminate possible rumors and to provide support to the staff.

Service Recipients' Privacy Rights

All interviews of clients shall be arranged through the Communications Director. The Communications Director will ensure there is a signed release ([Waiver of Liability](#)) and signed consent (form ***DCFS**** [35 - Consent to Release Information Other than Protected Health Information](#)) prior to the event. A copy of these signed forms shall be kept in the client files in the facility or office. Where appropriate, the guardian or custodian shall sign the forms on behalf of the minor or service recipient. The office involved shall control the situation to ensure the protection of the privacy rights of other service recipients.

When information concerning an incident of abuse or neglect has been made public through media reports, DCFS is allowed under [R.S. 46:56](#) (F) (8) and (9) to release limited information regarding whether or not the DCFS Child Welfare Section received a report and any action taken by DCFS. Limited information related to a child fatality or near fatality may also be released to the public when the case situation is one in which abuse or neglect was medically determined by an examining physician to be a contributing factor in the fatality or near fatality. All local requests from the media should be immediately referred to the DCFS Communications Director for response.


When clients speak to the media on their own accord, DCFS employees are still bound to observe confidentiality of information.

II. PROCEDURES

Each Division shares in the responsibility of maintaining good working relations with the public due to the nature of the protective/caring services provided by DCFS. In an effort to nurture good relations with both the media and the community-at-large, all employees shall follow the procedures described below for interaction with the media. These procedures and guidelines are designed to ensure timely and accurate communications with the media in a continuing effort to keep Louisiana citizens informed.

A. Media Inquiries

DCFS employees who are contacted by media representatives should first contact the Communications Director by telephone to discuss the nature of the media contact. In the event the Communications Director is unavailable, contact the designee (see Appendix A). The Communications Director will determine the proper contact/response and will coordinate

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that contact/response accordingly. Such contact includes, but is not limited to, the following subjects:

- Existing program information and statistics.
- New program information.
- Legislative issues.
- Official statements beyond those that have been previously established as policy, regulation, or law.
- Requests for confidential information.
- Areas outside of an administrator's jurisdiction (i.e., an administrator of a particular division or program office shall not discuss topics pertinent to another division or program office).
- Potentially sensitive issues or subjects such as budget cuts or major program changes, major cases of client abuse/neglect, or removal of clients from services.
- Information not readily accessible.

B. Special Procedures

1. Contracts for Special Public Relations Services


Employees, managers and program offices shall contact the Communications Director before contracting for public relations/information/advertising services. The Communications Director will determine if the services are available/feasible within the department before a contract for the services is processed.

2. Public Affairs Programs

Employees shall contact the Communications Director for approval to appear on any public affairs program. Programs aimed at public awareness that do not include TV or radio participation, such as community forums, panels, and in-service presentations, will be exempt. The Communications Director shall be informed of requested appearances in sufficient time to allow a determination to be made if the Secretary or Communications Director should appear, and preparation of speaking points.

3. Promotional Activities

DCFS employees shall confer with the Communications Director regarding the development of any publicity or information campaigns relating to DCFS programs or other activities. The Communications Director shall be informed of any public information, advertising, public service announcements, brochures, handouts or other public information materials before they are developed/produced to ensure coordination with overall DCFS policies and initiatives. This is applicable to all DCFS Programs, including but not limited to, Economic Stability (including Supplemental Nutritional

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Assistance Program [SNAP], Child Support Enforcement, and Child Welfare [CW] with the exception noted below).

Note: General foster/adoptive parent and child-specific recruitment efforts by the DCFS Child Welfare Section shall be exempt. These include newspaper/magazine advertising or television spots which highlight the placement needs of individual children, as well as general recruitment advertising by DCFS Child Welfare Section targeting the need for foster/adoptive families.

4. Media Access to Facilities and Clients

The Communications Director shall maintain control of facility access by reporters. If media wants access to DCFS facilities, the media should be immediately put in contact with the DCFS Communications Director. Client waiting rooms and building lobbies in state buildings are considered public areas. Access to these areas for reporters will be given routinely. The reporter should be introduced to clients or staff who may be in those areas. The reporter's purpose should be announced and it should be stated that participation/interaction is not required, but is allowed if a client signs a [Waiver of Liability](#) form and form [DCFS 35 - Consent to Release Information Other than Protected Health Information](#). These forms must be placed in the client's case file and copies should be sent to the DCFS Communications Director.

III. FORMS AND INSTRUCTIONS

[DCFS Media Crisis Information Sheet](#)

[DCFS Waiver of Liability](#)

[DCFS 35 - Consent to Release Information Other than Protected Health Information](#)


IV. REFERENCES

Definitions

Media inquiry — Request by a representative of the media for information pertaining to DCFS and its services.

Media representative — Person employed by a newspaper, magazine, radio or television station for the purpose of obtaining and disseminating news.


News release — Information pertaining to DCFS and its services that is formally given to a media representative for dissemination to the various public served by DCFS.

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Public — Clients of DCFS, taxpayers, legislators, employees of DCFS, the general population of the state.

Public affairs program — A radio or television program of five minutes to one hour's duration that deals with topics of interest to the general public.

Regional Manager/Administrator — DCFS staff in that position in certain Divisions (Operations and Programs).

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APPENDIX A

OFFICE MEDIA LIAISON/DESIGNEES

In the event that a media inquiry is received, the Communications Director should be contacted immediately. If the Director is not available, a member of the ***Office of Communications**** should be immediately contacted.

Communications Staff

Phone

Cell

***Catherine Heitman, Communications Director**

Catherine.Heitman.dcfs@la.gov

(225) 342-9640

(225) 335-0551**

Grace Weber, Public Information Officer

Grace.Weber.dcfs@la.gov

(225) 342-4908

(225) 400-5316*

If no one in the ***Office of Communications**** can be reached, please contact one of the following individuals immediately.

Division of *Child Welfare**

Phone

***Rhenda Hodnett**

Rhenda.Hodnett.dcfs@la.gov

(225) 342-4045**

Division of *Family Support**

Phone

***Alfreda Bester**

Alfreda.Bester.dcfs@la.gov

(225) 342-3877**